

John Hunt Morgan was born 1 June 1825 in Huntsville, Alabama. He was the first of ten children born to Calvin and Henrietta Hunt Morgan. His parents' choice of the name John Hunt, after his maternal grandfather, was a distinct break with the southern tradition of naming the first son after the paternal grandfather, the second after the maternal grandfather and the third after the father.¹ This break with tradition was the beginning of an orientation toward the Hunts that was to influence every aspect of John Morgan's life.

In early 1831, Calvin Morgan made a decision that was to draw his family even closer to his in-laws and set the stage for his eldest son's future. After his business, Morgan's Apothecary, failed and his house was almost sold for back taxes, he accepted an offer from his father-in-law to work as manager of one of the Hunt farms in Fayette county, Kentucky. He moved his wife and four children to a large farmhouse near Lexington and, in return for managing the farm as John Wesley Hunt's agent, he was provided with a suitable income from the proceeds of the farm.²

Although the farm, called Shadeland for the grove of oak and ash trees that surrounded the house, was small by plantation standards, it prospered under Calvin's management and became a showplace for livestock, including thoroughbred horses, cattle and hogs; and for crops such as hemp, hay and grain.³ It also allowed Calvin and his family to gain acceptance in Lexington society and provided an excellent place to raise a family that, by 1845, numbered eight children (two daughters died of cholera in 1833).

Once the Morgan family settled in at Shadeland and adjusted to their new life, John and his siblings had a normal plantation childhood. A slave named Bouvette, whom the children affectionately called "Aunt Betty", handled their early teaching. When the children reached school age they studied at home with Calvin or hired tutors. When the children weren't studying, there were many things for them to do. John and his brother Cal had access to some of the finest horses in the world and spent many hours riding and racing across the grounds of Shadeland. They also did a lot of hunting and soon became excellent horsemen and marksmen.⁴

When John H. Morgan was seventeen, it was decided that he had learned all that he could at home and should pursue a more formal education. At his grandfather's urging, he enrolled at Transylvania University, which was near Hopemont, the Hunt family home in Lexington. John moved to Hopemont and, his grandfather hoped, would continue the Hunt family tradition of attending Transylvania. John was unable to live up to his grandfather's expectations, however, and soon became involved in such unacceptable activities as playing boyish pranks, gathering with other students on the campus lawn to swear at passers-by, and dueling. The latter activity ended his academic career at Transylvania. John challenged one of his Adelphi Society fraternity brothers to a duel for a reason that is long-since forgotten. Although neither man was seriously injured, word of the duel soon spread. When university officials heard of it, they suspended John for the remainder of the semester and only reprimanded the other man.⁵ John believed that this was unfair and never returned to Transylvania.

After leaving the university, John was faced with the prospect of choosing a career. In doing this, he had to decide upon something that would not only provide him with a living, but also be in keeping with his family's social status. Business seemed the most logical choice but the Morgans were unable to help and his Grandfather Hunt had a policy of not lending money to relatives and not going into business with them. His only alternative was to follow the Morgan tradition of military service. He applied for a commission as a lieutenant in the Marine Corps but was turned down due to a lack of openings.⁶ At this point in his life, John Hunt Morgan spent two years "finding himself".

In the Spring of 1846, John got his first chance at military service. He and his brother Cal enlisted in Captain Beard's company of Colonel Marshall's regiment of cavalry after the United States declared war with Mexico. They were soon joined by their Uncle Alexander Morgan. John was elected second lieutenant and Cal and Alexander served as privates. The unit soon left for Mexico but it took them almost six months to get there and, in the words of John Hunt Morgan, they "didn't see much of war".⁷ They did, however, arrive in time to take part in the battle of Buena Vista. Captain Beard's company saw fierce action during the battle and accounted themselves well. John and Cal came through the battle unharmed but their Uncle Alexander was killed. After Buena Vista, Marshall's regiment didn't see combat again for the remainder of their enlistment. On 7 June 1847, they were mustered out in New Orleans and, on 19 June, they returned to Lexington by train.⁸ They were met with a hero's welcome and soon settled back into everyday life.

When John Morgan returned to civilian life, he was still a man without a vocation. He had enjoyed military life so much that he soon formed a volunteer cavalry company of his own. He petitioned the War Department to muster it into service and send it to Mexico but they refused. His company broke up and he applied for a commission in the regular army, only to be refused again.⁹ Once it became apparent that a return to the military was out of the question, John began to look in other directions and entered into a business partnership with his friend Sanders Bruce.

The partnership of Morgan & Bruce was a prosperous one. They began as retailers but soon expanded into other things including breeding and training racehorses and renting slaves to local farms and factories.¹⁰ John's first business venture was the beginning of a successful career for him but, more importantly perhaps, it provided him with a bride. Shortly after the partnership began, he began calling on Sander's sister Rebecca and, on 21 November 1848, they were married.¹¹ The newlyweds moved into the Bruce family mansion with Becky's widowed mother, the business continued to prosper, and the future looked bright.

In 1849, the the death of his Grandfather Hunt opened up new business opportunities for John. His mother, Henrietta, inherited Hopemont along with other Hunt properties and a sizeable amount of money.¹² She apparently didn't follow her father's policy of not doing business with family. She loaned John and his brother Cal enough money to start a hemp manufacturing business which, like all of his enterprises, soon prospered.

At this point in his life, John Hunt Morgan should have been a happy man. He was a successful businessman, he had a pleasant, pretty wife and, to all appearances, he was living the perfect life. In reality, his business and public life were going well but his personal life had begun to deteriorate. In September 1853, Becky gave birth to a stillborn son.¹³ From that point until her death in 1861, she remained in ill health and was never able to have any more children. The loss of their son and Becky's health combined with growing political differences over slavery between John and his in-laws to create problems that they were never quite able to overcome.

In the years after John left the military, his desire for a service career still remained and, in 1852, he formed an artillery company, which became part of the Kentucky State militia. As his home life grew worse, he spent much of his free time drilling with his company. This lasted until 1854 when the state legislature disbanded the militia. Many Kentuckians were upset with this and formed volunteer companies to replace the militia. Even though these companies had no state or federal affiliation, they provided an opportunity for those who wished to serve and John Morgan jumped at the chance to form a company. He raised an infantry company of about sixty men and called it the Lexington Rifles. He designed uniforms for the company and hired a Polish soldier of fortune to serve as drill instructor.¹⁴ The Rifles worked hard to become one of the best drilled companies in the state and, in their fancy green and gold uniforms, they were the pride of Lexington.

John Morgan's life in the late 1850's was divided between his successful business, drilling with the Lexington Rifles and the many other activities of Lexington society. It was overshadowed, however, by the political differences that continued to grow, not only in his family, but throughout Kentucky and the nation. The growing strife over slavery, states' rights and other issues became a part of everyday life. By 1860, the differences had become so strong that there was talk of war between North and South.

When war finally came with the secession of eleven Southern states from the Union and the bombardment of Fort Sumter, South Carolina in April 1861, John wanted to go south and offer the service of the Lexington Rifles to the Confederacy. His wife's health had taken a turn for the worse, however, and he was unable to go. In July Becky died and, by September, John had cast his lot with the Confederacy.¹⁵

When an order was issued that all state guard units such as the Lexington Rifles must disband and turn their rifles over to Federal authorities, John Morgan decided to take the rifles and go south. On the night of 20 September 1861, he gathered the fifty men who remained in the Rifles at the local armory. They split into two groups. One group loaded the rifles onto two wagons and slipped out of town while the other group drilled noisily inside the armory to give the impression that the whole company was still in Lexington. The two groups met later, outside of town, and traveled south to the Confederate lines at Green River.¹⁶

On the journey south, Morgan and his men were joined by another militia unit and by many individuals who wished to go south and join the Confederacy. These men elected him as their captain and, when he entered the Confederate camp on 30 September, he was in command of about two hundred men.¹⁷

Since there were many other units and individuals coming to the camp from all parts of the state, it was almost a month before Morgan and his men were mustered into service. During the time before he was mustered in, Morgan became bored with camp life. To relieve this boredom, he began to make "scouts" into enemy territory.¹⁸ It was on these forays that he developed many of the guerrilla tactics that he and his men would use throughout the war.

By the time that John Hunt Morgan was sworn into Confederate service on 27 October 1861 and elected captain of a cavalry company, he had acquired a taste for guerrilla warfare and soon became quite good at it. He and his men spent much of the Winter of 1861-62 raiding in Kentucky and Tennessee. They burned bridges and railroad trestles, cut telegraph lines, disrupted Union supply lines and generally wreaked havoc on Union forces in the West. Two of the activities in which they participated, killing Union pickets and dressing in Union uniforms to pass through the lines, were considered violations of the rules of "civilized" warfare and particularly angered Northerners. Morgan, however, saw nothing wrong with these activities and just considered them part of war.¹⁹

During this period of operations in Kentucky and Tennessee, two major events occurred in John Morgan's life. On 27 February 1862, he moved his headquarters to Murfreesboro, Tennessee. It was there that he met Martha "Matty" Ready who would become his second wife in December of that year. Effective 4 April, he was promoted to colonel, which, considering the size of his command and his rather unimpressive record, was quite an accomplishment.²⁰

About the time that his promotion became effective, Morgan left his men in Huntsville, Alabama under the command of Lieutenant Basil Duke who was his second in command and also his brother-in-law. He traveled by train to Richmond for a much-needed leave but was recalled to join the unit at Corinth Mississippi almost before the leave began.²¹ By the time Morgan was able to rejoin his men, they had advanced with the Confederate army under General Albert S. Johnston to Pittsburg Landing Tennessee.

The battle that occurred there on 6 and 7 April 1862 became known as Shiloh (after a small church in the area) and could have been the turning point of the war in the West for the South. General Johnston's army took the offensive on the morning of 6 April. They fought fiercely all day and, by early afternoon, had driven the Federals back almost to the Tennessee River. All that was needed to destroy the Federals was to continue the drive and push them into the rain-swollen river. At that point, they would have been forced to surrender and would probably have never posed any great threat in the West again. The drive ended short of the river, however, about two o'clock in the afternoon after Johnston was killed and none of the other commanders seized the initiative to continue it.²²

After the battle of Shiloh, the Confederate army, under General Pierre G. T. Beauregard, withdrew to Corinth and went into camp. Morgan still had no taste for camp life and requested permission to take his men back north into Tennessee and Kentucky. When permission was granted, he wasted no time in moving back into Tennessee. By 6 May, they had reached Lebanon, intending to camp for the night before moving on toward Kentucky. They were caught by surprise during the night and Morgan was lucky to escape with about fifty men. This small group did make it to Kentucky where they burned a train

and did some other minor damage near Cave City. This raid really didn't accomplish much, considering that most of Morgan's command was either captured or scattered at Lebanon, but the newspapers made much more of it than it really was. Morgan made the most of the newspaper coverage and convinced his superiors to give him another command.²³

Once he received his new command and gathered what could be found of his old one, John Morgan made plans to undertake a major raid. This raid occurred in July 1862 and was a thousand-mile journey through much of Kentucky.²⁴ The raid was so successful that it enabled Morgan to gain approval for two other major raids in 1862, including one on Gallatin, Tennessee in late summer and another into Kentucky at Christmas. His successes on these raids gained Morgan a promotion to brigadier general in December and set the stage for the greatest adventure of his career.

The Great Indiana/Ohio Raid, July, 1863

In June 1863, John Morgan approached his immediate superior, General Joseph Wheeler, with the idea of a raid on Louisville, Kentucky. Wheeler gained approval for Morgan to take 1500 men into Kentucky and Morgan immediately asked for 2000.²⁵ The request for an additional 500 men was granted and Morgan began to finalize his plans. He originally started the raid in late June but was delayed over a week guarding against Union cavalry that was supposedly moving toward Knoxville. The cavalry never came and, on 2 July, Morgan started north with 2460 men (almost 500 more than were authorized) on what would become one of the most talked-about adventures of the war.

The unit's first objective was to cross the Cumberland River. The area around the Cumberland should have been guarded by a Union brigade from General Henry M. Judah's Third Division but Judah feared an attack by Morgan and called all of his troops in to prepare for it.²⁶ Morgan had no intention of attacking an entire division and crossed the Cumberland right from where the Union troops had moved. After crossing the river, Morgan passed through Columbia to a place called Tebbs' Bend. There he encountered a force from the 25th Michigan, which had taken up a strong defensive position. His men attacked the position but soon saw that it was a lost cause and broke off the fight. From Tebbs' Bend they moved to Lebanon, Kentucky.²⁷

At Lebanon they came up against about 400 men from the 20th Kentucky. They trapped these men in the railroad depot but the building was well fortified and the fight lasted six hours. In the end, Morgan won the fight, but at a high personal cost. His youngest brother Tom was killed in the last charge of the day.

After the battle at Lebanon, Morgan continued north, still giving his superiors and the enemy the impression that he was headed for Louisville. South of Louisville, however, he turned his men to the northwest and crossed the Ohio River at Brandenburg, entering Indiana on 8 July.

By the time Morgan entered Indiana, he was causing quite a commotion. General Judah, realizing that he had let Morgan escape in Kentucky, dispatched a force of 2500 men under the command of General

Edward H. Hobson to catch the raiders. These men made good time and soon closed the gap between them and Morgan to less than 24 hours. The governor of Indiana mustered all able-bodied white males into service and soon had almost 65,000 militia looking for Morgan.²⁸ The Confederates managed to stay ahead of their pursuers, however, and spent the next five days destroying bridges and railroad tracks, robbing local government treasuries, and generally striking fear among the citizens of Southern Indiana.

On 13 July, Morgan crossed the Ohio line near Harrison. He knew that a large Federal army under General Burnside was stationed in that part of Ohio to protect Cincinnati and would most likely be in the city itself or in Hamilton. With this in mind, he began one of the greatest cavalry rides in history. He and his men passed between Cincinnati and Hamilton and traveled 95 miles around the city in 32 hours.²⁹ Once he made it past Cincinnati, Morgan believed that the hardest part of the raid was over and all that was left was an easy ride to the southern tip of Ohio where he and his men would cross the river into West Virginia.

From 14-18 July, Morgan and his men moved steadily toward the ford at Buffington Island, Ohio. If everything had gone as planned, they would have crossed the river on the 18th or 19th and, most likely, travelled back to Kentucky unmolested. Several things went wrong, though, and Buffington Island was, for the most part, the end of the raid. In the last days of the raid, Morgan made no effort to hide his destination. Because of this, Burnside was able to move a gunboat into the river near the ford and station a militia regiment from Marietta at the ford. He was also able to move Judah's cavalry from Louisville to Cincinnati to Portsmouth, Ohio, which put them in a position to join with Hobson's men and prevent Morgan's retreat. Burnside's accurate assessment of the situation and his movement of these troops set the trap for Morgan's capture.³⁰

When Morgan's command approached the ford, they saw the Marietta militia and, since it was growing dark, decided not to attack this force until morning. The militia, on the other hand, had no desire to face Morgan's men and slipped away during the night. When the Confederates awoke, they found the ford unguarded and prepared to cross. Before the crossing began, though, the Federal gunboat moved into sight and opened fire. This signaled Judah's men to begin their attack and Morgan found himself trapped.

Although the fight at Buffington Island should have been the end, Morgan made one last try at escape. 700 men under Basil Duke were captured at the ford but Morgan and roughly 1500 others escaped in the only direction still open- north. They attempted to cross the river again at a ford near Belleville, West Virginia but were once again stopped by the Federal gunboat. About 300 men did make the crossing but Morgan was forced to take the other 1200 on north.

After the failed crossing at Belleville, Morgan and the remainder of his command continued north with the hope of crossing into Pennsylvania. They kept up their journey until 26 July when, men and horses exhausted, Morgan decided to surrender. He contacted the local militia commander at New Lisbon (now Lisbon), Ohio and asked for terms. This was the best thing that he could do since the militia officer,

Captain Burbeck, might grant his men a parole but no regular Federal officer would.³¹ Captain Burbeck accepted Morgan's surrender and agreed to a parole but before it could be carried out, regular Federal cavalry commanded by General James M. Schackelford arrived. Shackleford refused the parole and, on 26 July 1863 near West Point, Ohio, General John Hunt Morgan and the remainder of his men were captured, ending the great Indiana/Ohio raid.

After the Raid

After their capture, the enlisted men of Morgan's command were transferred to military prisons as prisoners of war. The officers, however, were treated as civil criminals and imprisoned at the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus. This brought about cries of outrage from Southerners but it really worked to the officers' advantage. If they had been treated as prisoners of war, they would have been taken to the Confederate Officers' Prison at Johnson's Island, Ohio. This was an island in Lake Erie from which there was little chance of escape. The Ohio penitentiary was not escape-proof, however, and on 27 November 1863, seven men including John Morgan tunneled out of the prison and escaped south.

By Christmas, Morgan was back in Virginia. After the first of the year, he went to Richmond to try to gain another command. He issued a call for any men of his old command who were still in the south to join him again. These men and many others flocked to Morgan and he soon had a new command. With this new command, Morgan returned to the western theatre and was soon ready for action again.

Morgan made one last major raid into Kentucky in June, 1864. After this, he concentrated his operations in Tennessee and Western Virginia and, on 4 September 1864 near Greenville, Tennessee, he was caught by surprise by a Union force under command of Captain C. C. Wilcox. Morgan and his staff were roused from sleep by the approaching Federals and, since they were unarmed, attempted to slip out of town. Before they could escape, however, they were observed by Private Andrew J. Campbell. Campbell ordered them to halt and, when Morgan kept walking, Campbell shot and killed him.³²

The death of Brigadier General John Hunt Morgan not only cost the South a great military leader but it also brought to an end one of the most colorful chapters of the war. This loss was best described by his brother-in-law, Basil Duke, who said: "When he died, the glory and chivalry seemed gone from the struggle".³³

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Notes

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